CHAPTER THREE

STATE BUILDING IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS

Introduction

The North Caucasus has been conquered by many. Many bloody wars ensued and many invaders failed to conquer the territories sought. This has also been due to the population living in the mountains, whose knowledge of the region is unique, due to the fact that they have inhabited the area for centuries, sometimes millennia. The fact that the areas were not easily accessible also resulted in the preservation of old religions and old cultures. Some peoples, like the Circassians, converted to Christianity in the 12th century, and converted to Islam in the 18th century.\(^1\) In the meantime, they switched religion as often as was practical with regard to the powers struggling in the region. The majority of the population however kept their animist religion. It was only at the end of the 18th century that the last groups in Chechnya became Islamic.\(^2\)

The state building process in the North Caucasus since the domination of the Russians in the area started in the 19th century is helpful in understanding territorial claims of North Caucasian peoples since 1991. It also clarifies the relation between the central authorities in Moscow and the authorities in the North Caucasus.

The Russian Advances in the Caucasus in the 18th–19th Century

The Period of 1813–1827

In the North Caucasus, the Russians were expanding their territory at the beginning of the 19th century. Derbend was captured in 1796, neighboring Tabasaran submitted during the same year. In 1803

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\(^1\) Jaimoukha, *The Circassians*, 46 and 137.

\(^2\) Jaimoukha, *The Chechens*, 106 and 117.
Avaria, the most important of the khanates of Daghestan came under Russian rule.³

During the first half of the 19th century areas and cities in the North Caucasus changed hands frequently, which led to several cases of cession.⁴ In 1818 General Ermolov, who held the post of Russian chief commander in the Caucasus, gave order to construct a stronghold in the North Caucasus, in order to subdue the Chechens, who were almost constantly fighting Russian troops. This new fortress was called Groznaya, which means “threatening fortress”. In 1819 several of the more important free communities of Daghestan acknowledged Russian power. In the summer of 1819 the Russians conquered Tabasaran.⁵ On 29 August 1819 Sheki was proclaimed a Russian Province.⁶ In June 1820 Kazi-Kumukh fell in Russian hands.⁷ The free people of the Kubachi, living in the mountains of Kaitagh, joined the Russian Empire. In 1820 the khan of Kazi-Kumukh instigated an uprising amongst his neighbors, but was beaten by the Russians at Khozrek, his capital taken and his khanate incorporated with Kiurin. In 1824, the community of Kusu-bu, including Ghimri exchanged hostages as part of a peace-deal, where hostages were given on a word of honor.⁸ On 30 August 1829 Shirvan became a Russian Province.⁹

The Murid War, 1829–1859

In 1829 the Murid war started in the North Caucasus. Daghestani and Chechen clans fought against the Russian conqueror. Their leaders, Kazi-Mullah, Hamzad Bek and Shamil, were clergymen, who favored Muridism, which combined religion and politics. Their aim was to create a Muslim state in Daghestan, Chechnya and other Muslim North Caucasian territories.

³ Baddeley, 58, 295–296.
⁴ Cession is the transfer of territory from one state to another state through a treaty, see Malanczuk, 148, Brownlie, 153.
⁵ Baddeley, 129.
⁶ Note that this territory had been ceded to Russia already six years earlier, in the Treaty of Gulistan, Baddeley, 130.
⁷ Baddeley, 136.
⁸ Baddeley, 236.
⁹ Once again this is a confirmation of the Treaty of Gulistan, in which Shirvan had already come under Russian rule, Baddeley, 139.